

# Defending the Dead, Confronting the Archive: A Conversation with M. NourbeSe Philip

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Law and poetry both share an inexorable concern with language—the “right” use of the “right” words, phrases or even marks of punctuation; precision of expression is the goal shared by both. In the case of the former, this concern has both material and non-material outcomes. A proper interpretation of legislation can result in an individual’s physical freedom, confirmation of civil or human rights, or even death. In *Gregson v. Gilbert* the material and non-material would come together in unexpected ways. An accurate interpretation of the contract of insurance, according to the owners of the *Zong*, that is, would result in great financial benefit to them: they would be paid for murdering 150 Africans. At the same time, it would mean that the deliberate drowning of 150 people was not murder, but merely the disposition of property in a time of emergency to ensure the preservation of the rest of the “cargo”—a reasonable interpretation at that time given the law governing contracts of insurance.

—M. NourbeSe Philip, “Notanda,” *Zong!*

Two years ago I interviewed NourbeSe for the *Journal of West Indian Literature*, and at that time she was working on completing another collection of poetry entitled *Zong!*<sup>1</sup> As good fortune would have it, “Archaeologies of Black Memory,” the symposium and seminar hosted by *Small Axe* and the Caribbean Literary Studies Program at the University of Miami (June 2007), provided a most opportune occasion for me to continue the conversation with NourbeSe

1. Patricia Saunders, “Trying Tongues, E-raced Identities, and the Possibilities of Be/longing: Conversations with NourbeSe Philip,” in “Rooting and Routing Caribbean-Canadian Writing,” special issue, *Journal of West Indian Literature* 14, nos. 1–2 (November 2005): 202–19. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

about *Zong!* But more important, the symposium provided all those present with an immanent historical and political context for thinking about this collection of poetry in relation to a larger body of work engaged in critical examinations of the archive as a site, reservoir, or instance capable (when pressed into service by scholars) of producing knowledge about African diaspora subjects and subjectivity. While the symposium was an occasion for further thought and dialogue on this issue, to be sure these questions had been raised in a myriad of ways prior. One need only look to Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* and, more recently, *Lose Your Mother*, or Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts*, to appreciate the extent to which writers and scholars have been preoccupied with this line of critical inquiry.<sup>2</sup> *Zong!* shares affinities—careful deliberation as a foundational element, for one—with these and other works, but what is all the more promising is the extent to which their creative critical voices and questions are reconfiguring (in a fundamental sense) the form and language in which these critical deliberations are presented to the reading public.

One of the most striking aspects of NourbeSe's writing is her singularity of focus on the power of language and its role in shaping identity and subjectivity, particularly for black people living in the African diaspora. Language and authority are persistent themes throughout her collections of poetry, essays, fiction, and drama.<sup>3</sup> But in each instance, her writing draws the reading audience into another sphere of understanding and interpretation, whether it is through her manipulation of form, or the deployment of scientific discourses, Greek mythology, the imagination of young children, or the loud brashness of the notorious *jamettes* of Port of Spain. However, her contributions to African diaspora literatures have to be read and critiqued as part of an impressive body of writing by Caribbean Canadian writers. While her work is certainly rooted in the Caribbean, her critiques of art, culture, and politics are informed by a broader sense of a Caribbean diaspora, particularly in Canada. Up until my encounter with *Zong!* I believed that *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* was *the* most singular manifestation of this critical approach of all of her works. *Zong!*, however, extends the poet's engagement with language, law, oppression, and memory by situating itself on the high seas during the Middle Passage, to consider, or rather to remember, the enslaved Africans who were first thrown overboard, and then sentenced to a two-page document of

2. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), and *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007); and Fred D'Aguiar, *Feeding the Ghosts* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997).

3. See *Coups and Calypso* (Toronto: Mercury Press, 2001); *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays* (Toronto: Mercury Press, 1997); *Caribana: African Roots and Continuities; Race, Space and the Poetics of Moving* (Toronto: Pouli Publications, 1996); *Showing Grit: Showboating North of the 44th Parallel* (Toronto: Pouli Publications, 1993); *Frontiers: Essays and Writings in Racism and Culture* (Stratford: Mercury Press, 1993); *Looking For Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence* (Stratford: Mercury Press, 1991); *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (Charlottetown: Ragweed Press, 1988); and *Harriet's Daughter* (London: Heinemann, 1988).